

## THE SANTAMARIA MOVEMENT IN HINDSIGHT

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I am grateful for the opportunity to speak briefly about my 2001 book, *Crusade or Conspiracy? Catholics and the Anti-Communist Movement in Australia*, published thanks to the University of New South Wales Press. I have been wondering how I might approach this talk now that did not simply repeat what I had already written. I will not attempt here to summarise the contents of the book since, as some of you will know, I have already done so in a talk at the Sydney Institute in July 2001,<sup>1</sup> and also traced Santamaria's career into the later period in a 1998 talk to Labor historians in Melbourne.<sup>2</sup> However I am deeply conscious that my book covers only part of the Santamaria story, and the later period demands serious attention from some intrepid historians. Therese Woolfe has already opened up some of the themes here in her 1988 doctoral thesis on the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace.<sup>3</sup> The *Journal of the Australian Catholic Historical Society* has also taken up some significant lines of thought, particularly with Brian Croke's article on Archbishop James Carroll and Phillip Deery on Evatt's role in the Split.<sup>4</sup>

I understand that Ross Fitzgerald is preparing a publication on the Split, presumably concentrating on events in Queensland, and that Gerard Henderson is soon to publish a more general biography of Santamaria. I also believe that some people associated with the Santamaria family are considering or actually working on a biography, drawing particularly from the Santamaria files and of course their own family recollections. As more of the historical data become available to scholars, undoubtedly a fuller picture will emerge. Nevertheless, there is abundant material here to source a whole stream of further publications.

My own efforts were aimed at trying to clarify the narrative of events surrounding the Movement and the Labor Split, to explore the reasons behind particular developments and events, to outline the content of Santamaria's program, and to identify underlying issues, especially as they have continued to affect the Church. I have to confess that I never would have undertaken this project had I known it would take so long. Nor was it an easy book to write. It did not have a very happy ending. It recounted many painful episodes and exposed wounds that had never been properly healed. Many participants had vehemently different interpretations of events. And the immediate families of some of the principal actors may well

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<sup>1</sup> 'Santamaria, the Church and the "Movement"', *The Sydney Papers* 13, 3 (Winter 2003), 187-93.

<sup>2</sup> 'The Role of Catholics in the Cold War: the Conundrum of B. A. Santamaria', in Peter Love and Paul Strangio (eds.), *Arguing the Cold War* (Melbourne: Red Rag Publications, 2001), 85-90.

<sup>3</sup> Therese Margaret Woolfe, 'Witness and Teacher – the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace 1968-1987: a Study of the Ideology of a Catholic Church Agency', PhD thesis, Department of Government, University of Sydney, 1988.

<sup>4</sup> See Brian Croke, 'Politics and Prelates: the Carroll Style' (pp. 31-46) and Phillip Deery, 'Santamaria, the Movement and the Split: a Re-examination' (pp. 47-58), both in *J. Australian Catholic Historical Society* (Vol. 22), 2001.

have been unhappy with my findings. How does one do justice to the people involved, recognising that reputations could be at stake? I resolved as far as possible to let the documents speak for themselves, but was prodded by some key readers of the draft to interpret it more. The conclusion was the most difficult part, and went through numerous drafts.

Few historians would expect all reviewers to agree with interpretations in their publications. It is the nature of history to suggest, probe and debate interpretations of past events, recognising the limitations of the discipline and the complexity of human motivation and action. Many reviews of *Crusade or Conspiracy* have been generous and in my view generally accurate. However, to my surprise, instead of discussing the book or its significance, a few reviewers used it as a springboard to advance their own theories or recount their family involvement with those events. I even wondered how well some had read the book. Others seemed not to realise the significance of the long standoff between Santamaria and the thinking of Maritain, and how this dispute was part of the larger debate about how the Church should engage with the currents of modernity, and specifically how religious movements should relate to politics in modern democracies. I have been surprised that so far I have seen no one take up the more substantive issues raised by my book, especially to do with the Church's engagement with socio-political issues.

As many of you know, *Crusade or Conspiracy?* began as a two-volume work, but had to be cut to one volume to find a commercial publisher. I am still hoping to make the full text available on a CD-Rom so that more of the detail will be available to future researchers. Condensing the text to one volume meant making some difficult decisions to drop or condense significant themes: the perceptions of Aboriginal disadvantage, analysis of anti-Semitism, the co-operative movement, and the influence of overseas thinkers, particularly Belloc and the Catholic Social Guild at Oxford, among them.

However, beyond the obvious core issues of the analysis of communism and the politics to combat it in Australia, I tried to keep in mind two further themes: the Movement as a response to modernity and secularisation; and Santamaria's analysis of capitalism.

To put these themes into contemporary relief, I would like to relate in some part the experience of the Movement with ideas about confronting modernity expressed by David Hollenbach SJ in his 2002 work, *The Common Good and Christian Ethics*. Hollenbach is one of the leading commentators on Catholic social and political thought, and played a key role in the writing of the 1986 US bishops' economic pastoral, *Economic Justice for All*. He has continued with a stream of important publications about how the Church should engage with contemporary social and political issues in the United States. *The Common Good and Christian Ethics* summarises his thinking and outlines an approach to Catholic socio-political engagement. As you well know, there has been a great deal of writing and debate on religious responses to modernisation, indicating how complex are the processes involved, and I am of course not attempting to locate the Movement debate within that literature. But Hollenbach's book is a reminder that we are still dealing with similar forces of modernisation that Santamaria was trying to confront. What can we learn from the Movement experience, or what light does it shed on our contemporary encounter with modernity?

## **Santamaria against modernity**

Santamaria was not a philosopher and did not claim to be an intellectual, especially in his early years. He had not the time or opportunity for sustained, close analysis of social or political thought, but had to develop his thinking 'on the run'. Much less was he an economist, though I suspect some sustained study in economics would have greatly helped in developing his ideas. He was a political activist, who used ideas eclectically to serve his purpose, and sometimes articulated his views impressively. Yet one of his favourite comments, 'Intellectualism is a disease of the intellect', is a little bit of a teaser. Was he expressing a pragmatist's impatience with intellectual activity remote from contemporary social problems and challenges? Or does it go further and imply an underlying anti-intellectualism, or a rejection of thinking that could question his own projects? It is hard to know.

What we do know is that Santamaria did not sustain positive long-term collaboration with notable intellectual figures, and I think he deeply missed a certain intellectual companionship. Though he later wrote of his close relationship with Colin Clark and James McAuley, they seemed to have a different view of the relationship. Many of his key collaborators parted company with Santamaria, sometimes in stormy circumstances. Though the National Civic Council and *Newsweek* have survived, he has left no real heir as a public figure.

There can be no doubting Santamaria's energy, commitment or capacity. Nor can one doubt the immensity of the task before him. As we know today, the cultural currents and sociology of modernity and so-called post-modernity have shaken the Church profoundly and it is struggling to respond adequately, even with all the academic, human and material resources available and the promising rearticulation of Church belief in the Second Vatican Council.

By comparison, the resources available to the Campion Society and Santamaria were miniscule. The Church had basically adopted an apologetic approach to intellectual debate and theologians steered away from contentious areas. Despite efforts to maintain good will among the churches, there were few concessions on matters of doctrine, which would have been perceived as disloyalty. Sectarianism remained a powerful undercurrent that could surge powerfully and turbulently to the surface at any time, severely constraining open debate among people of different religious beliefs. The internal Catholic culture was strongly clerical and authoritarian. Lay people were expected to support the Church financially, and especially the schools, but had little say on ideas or policies. Catholics tended to channel their socio-political aspirations through the Labor Movement and the ALP.

Hence, it was something of a novelty for the Campion Society and their supporters, especially through the *Catholic Worker* and later Santamaria through *Freedom* and *News-Weekly*, to attempt to develop an informed Catholic lay voice on socio-political matters. These efforts often suffered from inadequate financial resources and partly in consequence, lacked top writers, and were forced to rely on voluntary contributors. Overwhelmingly Santamaria took personal responsibility for the intellectual development of the Movement and formulated its policies.

To make matters more difficult for Santamaria, he was clearly identifiable as of Italian background, at a time when anti-Italian sentiment was common, particularly as Italy had joined the Axis powers.

Santamaria began his political career learning the techniques of political activism and mobilisation through his work to set up and spread the network of groups forming the National Catholic Rural Movement. This involved not just writing pamphlets and developing a program for the Rural Movement, but extensive personal contact as he moved around the countryside giving talks in parishes and establishing groups. Though only in his early twenties, his credibility was buttressed by the authority of the bishops, and particularly of Archbishop Mannix. But Santamaria's own charm, personality and charisma were also significant factors, and he was able to achieve some significant results.

Santamaria's early social and political activities can be seen as an attempt to particularise a vision of the common good and to devise means to achieve this. Though he enthusiastically embraced the main lines of papal social teaching and began to adapt them to the Australian situation, curiously he later said his underlying vision of life values and society came not from the Church but from his Italian culture, 'a kind of peasant view of life' (see my pp. 402-403). Here Santamaria developed a highly idiosyncratic program composed of elements derived from

- widespread rural aspirations at the time, which sometimes overlapped with State Labor government programs,
- Distributist currents of thought, particularly from the United States, and
- what seem to be his own somewhat romanticised mental construction of Italian peasant farming and family values.

This agrarian vision was not an incidental aspect of Santamaria's proposals for Australia, as shown by his negotiations with State governments into the early 1950s to settle large numbers of immigrant farmers, especially Catholics, on the land. However, this vision it tended to be overlaid by his anti-communist activities to which he gave strategic priority, even subordinating the Rural Movement itself to the needs of the anti-communist struggle.

Though Santamaria's early *Catholic Worker* talked of itself as a 'Catholic Communist' publication, it also revealed a strongly conspiratorial view of the world, with both communist and capitalist forces arraigned against the Church. The mentality behind the paper at this stage was one not uncommon at the time and which is termed 'integralist', believing that the Church possessed ready answers to contemporary social questions, if only Catholics would advance the Catholic program strongly and others would accept it. Hollenbach also refers to the Catholic form of communitarianism known as 'integralism', which 'stresses the integral unity of religion, daily life, politics, the sciences, the economy, and the whole gamut of human endeavour.'<sup>5</sup>

Could the Movement be termed a 'fundamentalist' organisation? Hollenbach quotes a major US study defining religious fundamentalism as 'militant, mobilized, defensive reactions to modernity', tending to authoritarian organisation within the religious group and sharp boundaries against others.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.

<sup>6</sup> See *ibid.*, 95.

The Movement was certainly a militant, defensive mobilisation based on religious allegiance, but not against all aspects of modernity, about which it was deeply ambiguous. The powerful sectarian currents in Australian culture helped keep Catholics united with a clear sense of identity, particularly in relation to the grievance over State Aid. Catholic thought and culture were essentially reactive to aspects of political, and especially European, versions of liberalism, though Catholics were grateful for the liberties they enjoyed in Australia. Before the Spanish Civil War, not communism but big 'L' Liberalism was seen by some key social activists like Kevin Kelly to be the major enemy of the Church.

The Church's own practice of religious toleration nestled against the belief that other denominations had strayed from the true Church. Its mission was a proselytising one to win over adherents, and in Santamaria's view Australia was to provide a base for the conversion of Asia. Indeed the Movement was based on the intense religious conviction of its members, with many of its leaders in particular being daily Mass-goers.

As for Catholic socio-political thought, the social encyclicals provided the general parameters, opposing communism and urging the reform of capitalism. The encyclicals were necessarily rather general, and were explained and developed by a small number of Catholic commentators and writers, mainly from overseas. The most sustained early attempt to think through the implications of Catholic social thinking for Australian conditions came through the *Campion Society* and the pages of the *Catholic Worker*. What made this project more difficult was that there were no major Catholic thinkers in Australia effectively able to guide the youthful Santamaria and moderate his views, especially after many senior Campions joined the armed forces. Yet it is difficult to understand how Santamaria could have been so poorly advised by his clerical associates or supporters about the implicit 'Christian Democratic' tradition in Australia setting a framework for the relationship between religious and political activity. Or did he simply ignore such advice, as he did the views of his *Campion* colleagues? The lack of capable episcopal and clerical guidance was to prove a fatal handicap, and revealed how naïve was the Church in its response to the Movement crisis. Anti-intellectualism and lack of scholarship among the clergy exacted a heavy price.

In addition, the state of Catholic social thought in the English-speaking world was not brilliant, except for a few key thinkers like Maritain, John Courtney Murray and Yves Simon. But these and other innovative thinkers were under suspicion in conservative Catholic circles, even in sections of the Vatican itself. They were also thinkers Santamaria appears to have ignored.

No one could have anticipated the revolution initiated by the Second Vatican Council encouraging a more vigorous Catholic lay engagement with the social and political issues of the day. Nevertheless, much of the official thinking on the relationship between religious and political activity had been authoritatively articulated by Mgr Pavan and the international secretariat of Catholic Action, which Santamaria strongly resisted despite efforts by Rosemary Goldie and others to talk him around.

The Movement drew on the religious and social cohesion of the Catholic sub-culture or 'ghetto', but as a secret organisation was unable to give explicit direction openly to the wider Catholic community, except through the cumbersome structure of Catholic Action and the

social justice statements. Though the Movement depended on the legitimation of religious authorities, its leadership was in lay hands, with power tightly concentrated on the pattern of the Leninist Party itself. When it tried to extend its authoritarian influence over non-Movement Catholics, it met considerable resistance as we know, from the Campions, members of the Labor Party, clergy, bishops and even Roman authorities eventually.

Moreover, what I have called ‘ghetto strategy’ in the Catholic community was modified by what could be seen as a quasi-‘Christian Democratic’ understanding that Catholic social-political activity generally fell outside the range of clerical control, with lay people acting on their own initiative, notably through the Labor Movement and the ALP. The Movement invocation of the authority of the Church and bishops to push the Catholic community into a militantly political option rebounded harshly against it and irreparably fragmented Catholic cohesion. As Hollenbach commented:

When a religious vision of the good is identified with an agenda for the whole of public life, with no room left for critique of that religious vision or for serious exchange with other forms of belief, religious freedom is threatened.<sup>7</sup>

As far as Australia was concerned, authoritarianism was indeed built into the Movement from the start.

What was notably lacking in Santamaria’s approach was a more attentive and careful conversation with experts in relevant fields and people critical of his views. While he consistently tried to form strategic alliances in the industrial fight against communism, his programmatic aims remained decidedly ideological, open to refinement perhaps but seemingly not to renegotiation or thorough reworking.

His attacks on agricultural experts who disagreed with his attempts to promote widespread small settlement schemes revealed how tenaciously he held to aspects of his ideological worldview. Yet if he was not prepared to listen to expert advice and work collaboratively with such people to construct workable proposals for social reform, he would not be able to build a network of alliances and public support to make such proposals politically acceptable.

Instead he tried to have his proposals accepted by back-door political negotiations, using the force of numbers of Movement members and allies. He saw his growing influence in the ALP as a mechanism which could be used not only to eliminate the communists but to implement his vision for Australia. As John Douglas Pringle warned, it was a fatal mistake to try to get the numbers and force through his plans without public support. Pringle’s was a conviction which, as Hollenbach insists, is essential for religious influence still: ‘Persuasion is the proper mode of public participation by religious believers, especially when they seek to influence law or public policy.’<sup>8</sup> Ignoring this was one of the most critical mistakes of the Movement enterprise.

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 165.

Yet this is not the whole story. For Santamaria did take part in a significant conversation or debate with Lloyd Ross and others about the meaning of socialisation. This debate has been somewhat overlooked or misinterpreted by some authors, but in my view may have had the potential, if successful, to reorientate ALP policy and ensure solid Catholic support. If the Split and the anti-communist militancy had not overwhelmed the agenda, ALP social and industrial policies may have developed in quite a different pattern. From this perspective, I would not see Santamaria as fitting Hollenbach's definition of a religious fundamentalist. However, this question does suggest a contradiction between some of Santamaria's own efforts to shape social policies by negotiation, and his activist goals pursued through the Movement.

### **Santamaria on capitalism**

Santamaria's efforts to critique communism and the Australian economic system, especially through the social justice statements, were not trivial, but represented a sustained effort over nearly 15 years to sketch a direction for economic and social policy.<sup>9</sup> They deserve more careful consideration. It would be an interesting project to compare these early proposals with his criticisms of 'economic rationalism' in the 1980s and 1990s, but I will not attempt that here.

The early social justice statements basically summarised official Church teaching on socio-economic matters, before developing through the war years more innovative proposals for rural and industrial reconstruction. The statements urged a major reform of capitalism by redistributing property more widely, running industry on cooperative principles, paying a family wage and child endowments, and supporting home ownership. While suspicious of the power of the state, the 1943 statement, *Pattern for Peace*, paradoxically called for expanded government powers to control credit and to settle very large numbers of people in rural areas, especially immigrants with high birth rates. In 1945, Santamaria wrote *The Land is YOUR Business*, reiterating his rural vision, but it met with a cool reception, and though he continued to promote his agrarian views, this concern was increasingly overshadowed by the struggle against communism.

The statements *Peace in Industry* (1947) and *Nationalisation* (1948) reflect the sense of urgency of the industrial struggle at this time. *Nationalisation* was one of Santamaria's most skilful pieces of writing, reflecting his attempt to interpret socialisation in a way acceptable to Catholics and forge an alliance with non-communist socialist movements within the Labor Movement. The 1950 statement, *Morality in Public Life*, highlighted the internal threat to Australia from communism, and in 1951, *The Future of Australia* dramatised the external threat. Its famous cover depicted a map with a huge arrow pointing down from communist China to Australia.

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<sup>9</sup> Michael Hogan provided a valuable commentary and collection of these statements in *Justice Now! Social Justice Statements of the Australian Catholic Bishops 1940-1966* (Department of Government, University of Sydney, 1990). See also his *Australian Catholics: the Social Justice Tradition* (Melbourne: Collins Dove, 1993).

### **‘Religious Apostolate and Political Action’: an Italian influence?**

It is difficult to explain why Santamaria developed his new model of Church-controlled political activity in his paper ‘Religious Apostolate and Political Action’. It seems clear he believed that this proposal would provide a new model of Church action for social reform, whereby he hoped to implement his plans for rural and industrial reform. It is curious that he took this direction just after the World Congress for the Apostolate of the Laity explicitly rejected direct Church intervention in detailed political programs.

Rereading parts of my book reminded me of the importance for Santamaria’s worldview of his Italian cultural background. Santamaria’s choice of his 1934 university thesis on Italian politics leading up to Mussolini’s seizure of power, ‘Italy Changes Shirts: the Origins of Italian Fascism’, is not surprising, I suppose. Such a choice suggests that Santamaria was searching for a sense of cultural identity, and trying to locate his socio-political views in terms of his parent’s home country. Hence he immersed himself in a number of Italian writers and basically summarised and evaluated their views. The thesis was not a profound work, and I suspect he would have been disappointed at the state of Italian politics and the anti-clericalism of the time. But it introduced him in some detail to a reading of Italian politics at a very formative period in his intellectual life. I do not know if any of these Italian writers had any lasting influence on him. Probably not. But he was proudly Italian, and defiant of the anti-Italian prejudice of the time, wanting to demonstrate the honour and value of Italian culture and ideas.

A number of further questions arise. Santamaria appealed to Luigi Gedda’s Civic Committees as validating not only a mode of Church-based political activism that he thought he had in fact developed in the Movement, but as also legitimating the expanded political aims of the Movement as articulated in ‘Religious Apostolate and Political Action’. Did the Italian context of the Civic Committees appeal especially to Santamaria as satisfying a yearning to prove the metal of Italian Catholicism? He certainly saw his new theory of Church direction of political reform as a decisive key of historic proportions. We know that a romanticised view of Italian peasant society remained a critical influence in Santamaria’s life for years. Did the Italian context of Gedda’s putative example give it special appeal to him, distorting his judgment so that he overlooked the limitations that the papacy and the Italian Christian Democrats placed on Gedda? Santamaria’s confidence that the Sydney bishops would lose their appeal to Rome suggests that he was not being disingenuous in claiming Vatican support, but that he had badly misinterpreted the direction of Church thinking. It is difficult to know how he became so convinced about what was essentially wishful thinking on his part that he risked the entire Movement enterprise. But perhaps the Italian link provides some sort of a key to this puzzle.

### **Forging a vision**

In my view, the Movement’s militancy and narrow ideology doomed it to political failure. Hollenbach is undoubtedly correct that today ‘a less defensive, more positive engagement with others can lead to a better life for all under present circumstances’. But this was also true for the Movement at the time, as many Movement critics said. Unfortunately, the Movement could not readily transform itself into an open, democratic organisation, able to use normal democratic processes to win support for its policies.



In any society, the common good needs to be specified and particularised to meet the aspirations of all people and groups, winning their consent and cooperation through constant conversation and debate, to lead to improved goals and programs. In our time, especially after the tragedy of September 11, the boundaries of our conversation about the common good have expanded. We are now very aware that our conversation must no longer just be conducted within an ecumenical context, but within an inter-religious one, notably to include the Muslim world, but also including Hindus, Buddhists and others. As Hollenbach writes: 'We need a form of cooperation that goes beyond coexistence in parallel worlds to conjoint action to which we all contribute.'<sup>10</sup> This is true not just on a global level, but because of the multi-religious complexion of Australian society now, is true in a way which was not the case in the 1940s and 1950s.

I could not help recalling that Maritain in his meeting with Kevin Kelly in 1958, 45 years ago, said that Australia would have to sort out these questions of the Church's involvement with politics in the context of our proximity to Asia and the world's great religions (see p. 385). He thought it would take several hundred years to do this. I doubt we have that much time. The task Maritain foresaw for Australian Catholics is more pressing now, to create a more inclusive conversation about our common wellbeing for the future. It is no longer, as it was for Santamaria of the 1950s, a question of how the Catholic Church could remake Australian civilisation into his particular configuration, but how the major religions and peoples of all beliefs can develop a level of conversation and mutual exchange to fashion a vision of the common good that is appealing, just and achievable for people of all religions and cultures.

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 140-41.